

A Cultural Epiphany: Religious Dances of Bhutan and Their Costumes

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FOR MOST OUTSIDERS, THE RELIGIOUS DANCES OF BHUTAN ARE A VISUAL FEAST of colours, enhanced by the twirling movements of the dancers, rich costumes and often, but not always, intriguing masks. But what are the cultural and religious meanings that hide behind the masks and the costumes? Unravelling the different layers of meanings and their relevance to the Bhutanese, we will explore more particularly the amazing textiles that compose the costumes.¹

Buddhist Festivals

Religious festivals are numerous and, contrary to the common use of the word, they are not all *tsechus*. They have different names according to their types and what they celebrate, the best known being the *tsechus*,² which are festivals commemorating the great deeds of Padmasambhava also called Guru Rinpoche, the saint who introduced Buddhism in Bhutan in the 8th century. These great deeds are all believed to have taken place on the tenth of the month, which is the meaning of the word *tsechu*, even though all *tsechus* do not take place on tenth days. All the district *dzongs* (fortress-monasteries) and a large number of villages, have an annual *tsechu* which attracts visitors from the surrounding countryside (figures 1 and 2).³

Tsechus are celebrated for several days—between three and five according to the location—and are the occasion for dances that are clearly defined in religious content. They can be performed by monks, or by laymen or *gomchen* (religious lay practitioners), and the repertory is practically the same everywhere. More and more festivals end with a blessing by a huge and magnificent appliquéd and sometimes embroidered banner which “liberates by sight”, hence its name *thongdrel*. It means that simply by viewing it, people can be delivered from the cycle of reincarnation (figure 3).

The banner is unfurled along the wall of the temple and represents important deities or saints. As it costs several thousands of dollars to make, involving many months of painstaking work by specialized tailors, either monks or *gomchen*, the banner is usually sponsored by the community or by individual wealthy donors. Already in the late 17th century, the banner of Paro is said to have necessitated 300 bolts of silk. One oral tradition narrates that the master embroiderer could not complete the banner because the pink brocade required for the faces of the figures was not available. The state monastic community body was the patron of the tapestry and looked in vain for this colour of silk. Finally, the Paro Chamberlain managed to obtain some and donated the brocade as an offering.

Silk was precious and evoked prosperity as the Bhutanese word for both is the same—*dar*. Although Bhutan had raw silk (*bu ras*) similar to the *endi* silk of Assam, the quality was not the same as the Chinese silk because the Bhutanese did not kill the silkworms, for religious reasons. The local silk was therefore much coarser.

Weaving and needlework (*tshemzo*)—“stitching and embroidery on cloth and leather, subdivided into sewing and embroidery (*tshemdrup*), appliqué work, and patchwork (*lhendrup*)”—are two of the “13 Arts” classified by the Fourth Druk Desi Tenzin Rabgye at the end of the 17th century.⁴ Producing the monumental banner for a religious festival is a work of devotion and skill. The banner is one of the most spectacular products of textile art in Bhutan and it is a matter of pride for a community to be able to display such a banner that is testimony to its prosperity and high standard of living.

¹ The dance of Guru Rinpoche and his wrathful manifestations subduing evil spirits and ultimately the ego, Thimphu religious festival.



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The gathering of people watching the dance of Guru Rinpoche and his wrathful manifestations, Thimphu religious festival.

In a few important dzongs—Thimphu, Punakha, Paro, Trongsa, Wangduephodrang—two large festivals take place each year: a *dromchoe*, which generally includes dances and is dedicated to Yeshe Gampo (Mahakala) or Palden Lhamo (Mahakali), the two main protective deities of the Drukpas, and a *tsechu* dedicated to Guru Rinpoche. The *dromchoe* at Punakha takes place in the first month of the lunar year and ends with a *serda*, a magnificent procession which re-enacts an episode of the war against the Tibetans in the 17th century.

Musical Instruments

Music gives rhythm to the dances and religious ceremonies, and it punctuates the singing or recitation of the texts. While cymbals play the lead role in the orchestra, the sound of the long trumpets (known as *dungchen*) indicates the end of a dance. The instruments accompanying the dances are these long trumpets, oboes (*gyaling*), a double-sided drum (*nga*) held in a frame and beaten with a curved drumstick, different types of cymbals (*rolmo* and *posang*), a trumpet made from a human femur (*kangling*) and a conchshell.

In addition there is the *damaru*, a small, double-faced, hand-held drum that is beaten with hard pellets attached by strings to the body of the instrument, and the small bells (*drilbu*) which are used by the dancers. The *damaru* or *damdi* held by many dancers could also have a tassel of Chinese origin which came from Tibet. It consisted of four layers of cloth joined together and embroidered with auspicious



symbols in satin stitch. This ornament is also found hanging from ceremonial swords. The cases for the instruments may be made of cane or leather ornamented with copper, or more simply of thick cotton cloth in order to protect them during transport.

Dance Traditions

The religious dances can be grouped into three broad categories: didactic dances which are dramas with a moral (the Dance of the Princes and Princesses, the Dance of the Stag and the Hunting Dogs or the Dance of the Judgement of the Dead); dances that purify and protect a place from harmful spirits (the Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds, the Dance of the Stag, the Dance of the Fearsome Deities, the Dance of the Black Hats, the Dance of the Ging and the Tsholing, the Dances of the Ging with sticks, and with swords); and dances that proclaim the victory of Buddhism and the glory of Guru Rinpoche (all dances with drums such as the Drametse Ngacham, the Dance of the Heroes, the Dance of the Ging with drums, the Dance of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche). Some dances such as the Drametse Ngacham⁵ are believed to liberate the faithful who watch them.

Although all the dances in one way or another impart religious teachings to the public, their symbolic meaning can be rather esoteric, and therefore their presentation has to be didactic. For any audience, an enacted story is always more captivating, even if it is a well-known story, so the values are imparted to the spectators without much effort on their part.⁶

3 Devotees get blessed by the giant brocade appliqué banner which liberates by sight (thongdrel), representing the Buddha and his Sixteen Disciples, Thimphu Dzong.

Each village takes pride in its annual religious festival, whether it includes dances or simply prayers, and any person who has gone to live and work in the city is expected to come back home for it. For the Bhutanese, religious festivals offer an opportunity to become immersed in the meaning of their religion and to gain much merit. They are also occasions to take a break from the chores of the traditional rural life; to see people, and to be seen; for social exchange and for flaunting success. People bring out their most beautiful jewels; they enjoy picnics rich with meat and abundant alcohol. Men and women joke and flirt. An atmosphere of convivial and ribald good humour prevails. Everybody is dressed in their finest garments and it is a wonderful occasion to see the intricacy and dizzying diversity of Bhutanese textiles, as good as watching a fashion show. Indeed, if the shape of the Bhutanese dresses does not change so much, the way they are worn and the design of the textiles allow the connoisseur to appreciate what is in fashion, what is out, and which strata of society the wearer belongs to.

The numerous religious dances are called *cham*.⁷ Dancers, either monks or lay practitioners, wear spectacular costumes made of yellow silk or rich brocade (*gos chen* “great garment”), often decorated with ornaments of carved bone. For certain dances they wear masks which may represent animals, fearsome deities, skulls, manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, or human beings.

According to Ardussi,⁸ “Bhutan’s famous *Tsechu* traditions of monastic ritual and dance were brought from *Nyingmapa* monasteries in Tibet and regularized at the 4th *Desi* Tenzin Rabgye’s behest. In Bhutan, the performances also had a more subtle motive, to patronize the protective deities who safeguarded her from external (i.e. Tibetan) political enemies. The promotion of *Tsechu* in different parts of Bhutan could thus contribute to a sense of the nation-state. The government underwrote manufacture of the expensive costumes, and the first full performance with the new staging took place at Tashichhodzong for the *Tsechu* of 1690, the prototype for the celebration as it is performed to this day.”

Dance Costumes

The sponsoring of costumes for the religious dances is viewed as a meritorious act. For example, in 2013 the Royal Grandmother Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck gave a set of five expensive brocade costumes for the dance of Lhamo which takes place during the eighth month at the Thimphu dromchoe.

Bhutanese wanted only the best for the costumes, if they could afford it, and when it came to government-sponsored events, no expense was spared. According to Ardussi,⁹ “17th–18th century historical accounts tell us that Bhutanese collected exotic cloth for religious hangings and monastic garments from as far away as China and Lahore.” Nowadays, envoys are sent to Hong Kong on special missions to buy the necessary brocades for the costumes or the banners.

At least from the Fourth *Desi* Tenzin Rabgye’s time (late 17th century), the brocades for the costumes were brought either from China via Tibet, or from Varanasi (Banaras) in India which was known for its silk weaving quality. The silks from Varanasi were called *kashika* after Kashi, the ancient name of the city, and a special silk used for dance costumes was called *adholishi*.¹⁰ Nevertheless the Chinese brocades were always considered as superior in quality and most sought after. A whole vocabulary, sometimes derived from Chinese textile typology, was developed. In



4 The spectacular Black Hat dance performed by monks to tame bad influences, Thimphu religious festival.

1695, when the great Bhutanese religious master Jamgon Ngawang Gyeltshen left the kingdom of Derge in Eastern Tibet to return to Bhutan, the king gave him a lot of brocade and silk to take back with him.¹¹ However, even in Tibet, silk was not a common commodity and the Fifth Dalai Lama noted during his trip to China in 1652 that “60 cloaks for the *cham* dance were made from silk [...] Unlike in Tibet, it was very handy to find silks immediately, whatever colour and motif one wished to have.”¹² The brocade dance costumes have patterns which were in vogue in 18th-century China of the Qing dynasty and which have become classics of the Chinese textile repertoire: clouds, rainbows, mountains, dragons and flowers. Nowadays, cheaper brocade is available from India and is used in many local festivals.

Monk-tailors (*dratshang tsempons*) make all the costumes for the festivals which take place in the dzongs while lay religious practitioners (*gomchens*) make the ones for the village festivals. Making the costumes for sacred dances is also a meritorious act and a privilege.

Not everybody could afford the costly bales of silk brought at considerable expense from China via Tibet, or from India. In the villages until the 1980s, in order to make the required yellow skirts with floral patterns, people brought cheap yellow cloth from the Indian towns neighbouring the southern border and printed the colour pattern, not even with wooden blocks as in rural India, but by cutting radishes and using them as printing blocks.¹³ Today polyester patterned cloth is available readymade from India.

The costumes of the dances fall into three broad categories: the lay people's dresses, the heavy brocade robes of monks and celestial beings and the yellow skirts of evil spirits. The quality of lay people's dresses, such as in the Dance of the Noble-men and the Ladies or the Dance of the Stag and the Hounds (also called the Dance of Milarepa), depends on the social status they represent. It will be brocade *gho* (male costume) and intricately woven *kira* (female dress) for the upper strata, implying that they are wealthy and do not need to do jobs that will dirty themselves. The servants' or villagers' characters wear dark, often scruffy and ill-tailored costumes.

The dancers representing wrathful deities and performing subjugation dances such as the Black Hat dance, the Tshogling or the Tungam (see figure 1) are usually monks and they wear a heavy and elaborate brocade gown with kimono-like sleeves. The gown reaches the ankle and forms tight pleats which are kept erect by a piece of wood at the hips. Under his gown, the dancer wears a white cotton petticoat or pants depending on the dance. While the dancer swirls, the robe balloons out, making the choreography more dramatic and effective in the eyes of the audience. In the case of the Black Hat dance, the front part of the gown is covered by a brocade appliqué or painted apron (figure 4).

The dancers who represent celestial beings called *khandroma* who are present in three religious dances, don a straight ankle-length dress of brocade, sometimes ornamented with bones, aprons and jewels.

In many dances of victory or of subjugation of evil spirits, such as the Drametse Ngacham, the Gings or the Pawos, dancers are barefoot and do not wear a shirt (figures 5 and 6). Their costume consists of a yellow skirt called *mentse* if it has patterns, *darser* if it is without patterns. It is a textile common to the whole Himalayan region and the word *mentse* might be a form of the Chinese *mianzi* which means "cloth covering".¹⁴ In fact, the skirt is not stitched but made of scarves of different colours which are loose and only become a skirt by being fastened to a large belt which may be made of leather or handwoven.

The whole skirt is made of five coloured scarves called *darnang nga*: white, blue, green, red, and yellow. The colours are pleasing but also have a deeper meaning—they symbolize the five kinds of wisdom necessary to reach enlightenment. The coloured spot pattern on the *mentse* symbolizes the achievement of four virtuous actions: the white is for peace, yellow for progress, red for power, blue for wrath. Thus, by wearing this skirt, the dancer is empowered to perform the four main activities of Tantric Buddhism. Under the skirt, the dancer usually wears pants of striped or spotted cloth, which represents the skin of a tiger or leopard, powerful animals that have been subdued, signifying the elimination of hatred and control.

In many dances, including those where an upper jacket is not worn, the dancers wear a *dorji gon*, a kind of poncho collar with appliqué cloud patterns which symbolizes the armour of tolerance, as well as two flat crossbands (*gotrab*) across the



upper body which represents the eradication of desires. They are made of colourful brocade with appliqué religious motifs.

The Lords of the Cremation Grounds (*durda*) simply wear a whole suit of white cotton, sometimes with bones painted on them, to which, in some cases, is added a skirt made of scarves. Their white cotton gloves (*lagshup*) signify that they have both intelligence and strategy while their white shoes (*kangshup*) represent their magical legs.

Dances such as the Choezhey, which celebrate a historical event, are often included in a festival. Here the dancers wear thick cloth headbands, heavy pleated skirts, jackets and breastplates which are believed to be representative of the costumes of the 17th-century militia.

The boots (*cham lham*) that are worn during the dances only performed by monks are made of leather, deer and goat skin being considered the most supple. They were once made by Tibetans in Paro and Bumthang but this work is frowned upon and it is difficult to find leather craftsmen these days. The upper part of the boot is made of thick cotton or silk with appliqué patterns or felt and is held onto the leg by thin woven garters.

In some Bon rituals, still practised in areas in the northeast of the country, women dancers wear an ancient sleeveless tunic called *shingkha*. Made of dark wool or cotton, it is ornamented at the collar, shoulders and sides with appliqué patterns.

Masks

The masks worn by the dancers for some dances are made of papier mâché or of coniferous wood. Because the papier mâché technique was too labour-intensive, the masks are today almost exclusively made of wood. They are divided into four categories: peaceful deities, wrathful deities, animals and humans. Each deity is in fact represented by a peaceful and a wrathful mask, which symbolize the two aspects of the deity, depending on the actions to be performed. This is one of the basic concepts

5 Dance of the Ging, celestial beings, holding sticks to catch evil spirits, Petsheling monastery. This dance was seen in a vision by the great saint Pema Lingpa (1450–1521).

6 Dance of the Ging, celebrating with drums the victory of Buddhism, Petsheling monastery.

of Tantric Buddhism; the wrathful deity masks are not demonic masks as the 19th and early 20th century Western writings have depicted them. Often a mane made of thick and twisted cotton threads hangs from the top of a wrathful deity mask, which moves furiously when the dancer shakes his head, thus emphasizing the wrathful action. However it also symbolizes the wisdom of the deity spreading in all directions.

The animal masks are certainly the most enigmatic as the explanations concerning their origin are not historically convincing and their meaning is not clear. There are up to 16 masks, including those representing mythological animals, used in the Drametse Ngacham. Some scholars link these masks to the 12 animals of the astrological cycle, while others to the interdependence of beings in the material world or *samsara*. Dancers who represent the attendants of the goddess Palden Lhamo wear raven masks (figure 8).

The human masks are white and youthful in appearance when they represent holy figures and the noble class, while they are dark and wrinkled when it comes to sinners or the lower echelons of society.

The masks are so heavy that a dancer has to protect himself from injury by binding his head in strips of cotton cloth which provide padding between the head and the mask. The dancer sees out through the mouth opening and the mask is tied at the back with strong strips of cotton cloth. However, some of the dances do not require masks but more or less elaborate headgear, ranging from the simple headdress of leaves to the red cloth hat of a religious figure, the spectacular Black Hats and the Five Wisdoms crowns.

In any festival indispensable characters are the *atsaras* or jesters whose expressive masks and postures are a hit with the crowd (figure 7). They mock the monks and the public, assist the dancers with their costumes, propagate reproductive health messages, toss around salacious jokes, and when the religious dances begin to grow tedious, distract the crowd with their antics. Believed to represent the *acharyas*, religious masters of India, they are the only people permitted to mock religion in a society where sacred matters are treated with the highest respect. For a few days these popular entertainers are allowed the freedom to express themselves within an established framework that does not, however, upset the social and religious order. Their costumes and masks vary according to the regions but they today usually wear red pants and red shirts, and have a red mask with a prominent nose, a facial feature often associated with Indians.

Besides these *atsaras* whose costume origin is not known, there are other characters belonging to the local history or specific to a dance and who are somehow equated to *atsaras*. These include Acho Phento, the Hunter's servant in the Dance of Milarepa, or the *gadpo* and *gadmo*, "old man and old woman, the ancestors", in central and eastern Bhutan. Their costumes and masks are different from the *atsaras* and seem to reflect regional influences. The *gadpo* and *gadmo* wear heavy woollen dresses and poncho collars typical of the central region's weaving tradition, their masks represent wrinkled old people and they carry a *shang*, a single cymbal typical of the Bon tradition, which is not used in Buddhist rituals.

Thus, the costumes and masks of the religious dances in Bhutan possess a deep symbolism which goes much beyond their beautiful and colourful appearance. They reflect the concepts of Tantric Buddhism as well as the social order and centuries-old local beliefs, and are testimony to the ancient links of Bhutan with its neighbours.



7 The atsara or jester with distinctive mask, at the Thimphu religious festival.

8 Dancer representing an attendant of the protective deity Palden Lhamo (Mahakali) with raven mask, Thimphu religious festival.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank here all the friends and colleagues in Bhutan who have guided me through the complexity of the religious dances, and especially Lopen Kunzang Dorje from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA) whose manual of dances will be published soon.
- 2 In order to provide easy reading for non-specialists, the Tibetan and Dzongkha names and nouns have been only transcribed and not transliterated. The literature already published on Bhutanese textiles includes:
Diana K. Myers and Susan Bean, eds., *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon: Textile Arts of Bhutan*, London and Salem: Serindia and Peabody Essex Museum, 1994.
Françoise Pommaret, "Textiles of Bhutan: Way of Life and Symbol of Identity", in Michael Hutt and Michael Aris, eds., *Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development*, Gartmore: Kiscadale Asia Research series no. 5, 1994, pp. 173–89.
Françoise Pommaret, "Bhutan and Its Neighbours", "The Fabric of Life in Bhutan" and "Cut and Stitched: Textiles Made by Men", in Myers and Bean, eds., 1994, pp. 47–70, 71–80 and 143–66.
- 3 The complete librettos of the Paro, Thimphu and Wangduephodrang tsechus were translated in the early 1980s by this author under the name of Tashi Wangmo, and are now available from the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO).
- 4 Terese Tse Bartholomew, "The Art of Bhutan", in Terese Tse Bartholomew and John Johnston, eds., *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, Chicago and Honolulu: Serindia and Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2008, p. 39.
- 5 Proclaimed by UNESCO in 2005 a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.
- 6 Françoise Pommaret, "Dances in Bhutan: A Traditional Medium of Information", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 14 (Summer 2006), pp. 26–35. Available online at www.bhutanstudies.org.bt.
- 7 Sithel Dorji, *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances (dPal ldan 'brug p'i 'cham gyi 'byung khungs dang le'u bshad)*, Thimphu: KMT Press, 2000.
- 8 John Ardussi, "Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye (1638–1696), Artist Ruler of 17th Century Bhutan", in Bartholomew and Johnston, eds., 2008, p. 89.
- 9 Ibid., p. 92.
- 10 Michael Aris, "Textiles, Text and Context", in Myers and Bean, eds., 1994, pp. 39–40.
- 11 Yonten Dargay and Per K. Sørensen, "The Diplomatic Career of Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltzen", in Bartholomew and Johnston, eds., 2008, p. 106.
- 12 Samten G. Karmay, *The Illusive Play: The Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, Chicago: Serindia, 2014, p. 305.
- 13 Oral information provided by Lopen Kunzang Dorji, RAPA, May 2014.
- 14 Aris, "Textiles, Text and Context", 1994, p. 40.

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